

BRIEF COMMUNICATION

Gerota and Brâncuși: Romanian anatomy and art face to faceA. R. M. Chirculescu,^{1,2} Andra Panduru,³ Mihaela Chirculescu¹ and J. F. Morris²¹*Department of Anatomy & Embryology, Faculty of Medicine, C. Davila University, Bucharest, Romania*²*Department of Physiology, Anatomy & Genetics, Oxford University, Oxford, UK*³*Department of Aesthetic Anatomy, National University of Arts, Bucharest, Romania***Abstract**

Gerota's name is associated with two eponyms and two histochemical methods, but he was also Brâncuși's teacher and supervisor. When Brâncuși was a student in Bucharest, he produced an 'écorché' (flayed man), of which six plaster replicas still exist, two in apparently the original shape and four which have been modified/'cosmetized'. The two are in the University of Arts in Bucharest, one in the main hall, the other in the classroom used for teaching students. Of the other four, one is in the Museum of Arts and one in the Museum of Natural Sciences of Carol I National College in Craiova (where Gerota graduated in 1885), and one each in the Faculties of Medicine in Cluj Napoca and Iassy. One more probably existed in the Faculty of Medicine in Bucharest, and one in the Faculty of Fine Arts in Iassy but no trace of them could be found. The original clay model was lost (or destroyed during transportation) in the 1930s or 1956. Two variants of the écorché exist: one 'artistic' (slender and smoother) in the University of Arts in Bucharest; the other more 'anatomical' (muscular, robust, athletic) in Craiova, Cluj and Iassy. Both variants are a very realistic representation of the human muscular system, but with that extra which only a master artist can add. Interestingly, the head of the écorché bears a striking resemblance in attitude and curves to that of Brâncuși's famous head of Mademoiselle Pogany. The replicas appear to have been distributed to embellish the capitals of four of the six historical Romanian provinces: Muntenia (Bucharest), Oltenia (Craiova), Moldavia (Iassy), and Transylvania (Cluj).

Key words abstract anatomic representation; aesthetic anatomy; anatomic eponyms; C. Brâncuși; D. Gerota; écorché; histochemical methods; natural anatomic representation.

Dimitrie Constantineanu Gerota (b. 1867 Craiova, d. 1939 Bucharest), a well-known Romanian anatomist, was professor and head in the 2nd Department of Applied Anatomy of the School of Medicine in Bucharest from 1899 until 1937. His name is primarily associated with topographic and structural anatomy, as well as original histological methods (Constantineanu Gerota, 1892): in particular the perirenal (and pararenal) fascia and fat (Gerota, 1895a); an original method to inject/stain lymphatic vessels (Gerota, 1896a,c,d) from the gonad (1896b) and rectum (Gerota, 1895b); and an original method to stain myelinated fibres of the gut wall (Gerota, 1896d, 1897). His name is also associated with that of Constantin Brâncuși (b. 1876 Hobița-Peștișani, Romania – d. 1957, Paris, known better as 'Brancusi'),

because Gerota was also Professor of Aesthetic Anatomy in the Academy of Fine Arts in Bucharest (1897–1914) during which time Brâncuși studied there (1898–1902).

In preparation for teaching aesthetic anatomy, Gerota took intensive lessons in drawing (Velisaratu, 2007), a skill appreciated by his students, and possibly also in modeling. In 1902, under Gerota's supervision, Brâncuși created an 'écorché' in clay, which was produced in some plaster replicas, ordered by the Ministry of Public Education for teaching anatomy in the most important Romanian high schools (Petringeru, 1983).

The young Brâncuși created some very realistic sculptures (1898–1902): the écorché, a female hip (marble), heads of Laocoon, Vitellius, a series of children and a life-size bronze bust of Carol Davila which still decorates the Military Hospital central yard in Bucharest. Brâncuși also created a number of ovoid very 'simple' but controversial shapes: the famous egg 'Beginning of the world'; Sleeping muse; 'The Danăide' series; and Mademoiselle Pogany's portrait-bust (in three to 17 variants according to different sources). It is said that, when first seeing the simple oval bust Margit

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Pogany exclaimed: 'That's me' (<http://www.tate.org.uk/about/media/copyright/>).

Produced by one of the founders of abstract sculpture, the *écorché* is an impressively realistic representation of the human muscular system, with that indefinable extra quality that only a master artist can bring. Brâncuși's *écorché* is unique among *écorchés* made in the context of teaching, being less formally didactic than those of Houdon, Salvage and especially Auzoux. Before modeling the *écorché*, Brâncuși took special classes and participated in dissection sessions in the School of Medicine, Bucharest, under Gerota's supervision (Bercuș, 1981; Petringenaru, 1983; Ionescu, 1991). He also made several sketches, seven preparatory drawings being published by Barbu Brezianu (1998). The original *écorché* was made between 1901 and 1902 (Brezianu, 1965; Petringenaru, 1983). It was displayed in the main hall of the Romanian Athenaeum, between December 1902 and June 1903 (Brezianu, 1998) or May 1903 (Petringenaru, 1983), and later acquired by the Ministry of Public Education and Culture (Minister: Spiru Haret) at the request of the Society of Students of the School of Fine Arts (Ghițescu, 1981; Petringenaru, 1983), but at Gerota's suggestion. However, at some point the project was abandoned, because the Minister disliked Brâncuși's vision for a monument dedicated to him (Petringenaru, 1983)! Local reports say that Brâncuși made at least four plaster replicas of the original clay model: two for the Academy of Arts and two for the faculties of Medicine in Bucharest and/or Iassy. Who made the other two – Brâncuși or Gerota or both or neither – remains a mystery. The pedestal label (Fig. 2C) suggests Gerota's active involvement. However, Bercuș (1981) implies that all the replicas were made by Brâncuși.

Recently, we have located two *écorchés* in the Academy of Arts in Bucharest, two in Craiova (in Carol I National College Museum, and in the Museum of Arts), and one each in the Faculties of Medicine in Cluj Napoca and Iassy. However, no trace was found in the Faculty of Medicine at Bucharest or Craiova. An *écorché* was present in the classroom of Anatomy of the National Academy of Physical Education and Sport in Bucharest in 1990–91 (when A.R.M.C. taught there), but now (2008) cannot be found to determine if it is or resembles Brâncuși's *écorché*. It was said that Rainer took it there from the Faculty of Medicine when teaching anatomy and biomechanics (1920–31). The Carol I College (where Gerota graduated in 1885) also has a beautiful, life-size, black and white drawing of the *écorché* made in 1972 by Ion Budică, professor of Arts in the College.

Our investigations show for the first time that there are now two variants of replicas of the *écorché*: one more artistic (slender, smoother, in the 'Hellenistic' (2–1 B.C.) style) in the Academy of Arts in Bucharest (two plaster replicas; Fig. 1A); the other more muscular (robust, athletic, in the earlier 'classical Greek' (5–3 B.C.) style) in Craiova (Fig. 1B), Cluj and Iassy (four replicas). Both variants are life-size: those in Craiova are 1.70 m high according to the docu-

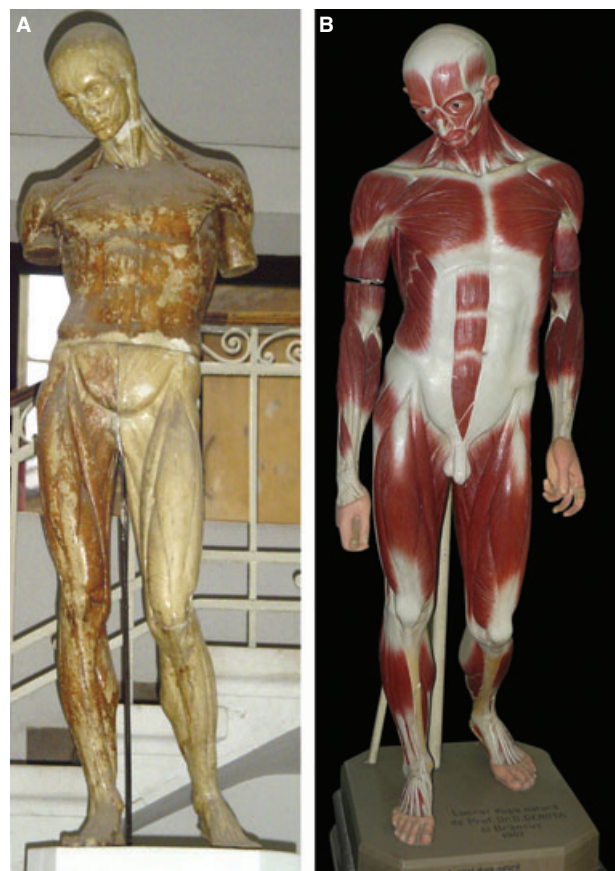


Fig. 1 (A) The *écorché* in the main hall of the University of Arts in Bucharest. (B) The *écorché* now in the Museum of Art in Craiova, similar to those in the Museum of Carol I College in Craiova and in the Departments of Anatomy in the Faculties of Medicine of Cluj Napoca and Iassy.

ments of the museum and our measurements; those in Bucharest are 1.72 m high (our measurements), although Paleolog (2004a) says the *écorchés* are 1.77 m high. The support, silhouette, attitude, equilibrium, expression of the face, hands, body, feet, etc., of the two variants are a little different, although even the 'athletic' *écorché* has an elegant line. The *écorchés* in Craiova and Cluj are complete; those in Bucharest and Iassy have no upper limbs, but only shoulders, arm roots and devices for screws to fix the arms. Where the copies were made is unknown, as is the reason for the two variants.

The pieces in Craiova, Cluj and Iassy look similar: painted with fresh colours – muscles in red, tendons, aponeuroses, fascias and retinacula in white; ears, spermatic cord and external genitalia represented; repaired damages, and 'refurbished' (1948–52), by a professional painter at 'Didactica' in Bucharest, an institution which produces commercial plaster and plastic models for teaching). One of the specimens in Bucharest is faintly painted, the other plain white. The left leg of the *écorché* seems to be its 'Achilles' heel' as, in all its variants, it has evidence of damage and repair.



Fig. 2 (A) Detail of the head of the écorché in the classroom for Aesthetic Anatomy, University of Arts, Bucharest. Compare this with (B) Head of Mademoiselle Pogany, bronze replica, 1913; version in the Museum of Arts in Craiova. (C) Inscription on a pedestal of the écorché in Craiova: 'Made from a natural model by Prof.Dr. GEROTA and Brâncuș 1902' (translation from Romanian); Brâncuș's name is misspelled; details of the feet can also be seen.

The position of the head is interesting (Fig 2A); Brâncuș used it for different pieces including the head of Mademoiselle Pogany (Fig. 2B): semi-flexed and semi-rotated, it shows a dreaming, pensive mood. The two écorchés in the Academy of Arts in Bucharest differ from the four elsewhere: they are more elegant, slender, dynamic and curved, seeming to walk or dance; the head is in a slightly different semi-flexed position, with a different shape and glance, the face more elongated, the muscles not strongly emphasized, and the surface of the face, limbs and trunk smoother.

It seems that Gerota may have been directly involved in the modelling. According to Bercuș (1981), between 1899 and 1914 Gerota made and repaired plaster and wax models for teaching in the workshop in the Department of Anatomy in Bucharest. Indeed, the inscriptions on the pedestals state 'made by Prof. Dr. GEROTA and Brâncuș/ from a natural model, 1902' (Fig. 2C) or some variant of this (Ionescu, 1974; Ghițescu, 1981; Petringenaru, 1983), although changes in labelling may have been made for political reasons after Brâncuș fell out of favour. Brâncuș himself seemed very proud of the écorché so that, in the 1930s (Brezianu, 1998) or 1956 (Ghițescu, 1981), he wrote to the Rector of the University of Arts in Bucharest asking for the clay model or a replica of it to be sent to him in Paris. How-

ever, it either arrived destroyed due to unsuitable packaging (Brezianu, 1998) or did not arrive (Ghițescu, 1981) and no trace of the original clay model now exists.

It is interesting that, although Ghițescu was Professor of Aesthetic Anatomy in the Academy of Fine Arts in Bucharest from 1978, the écorché pictured in his book is the type with upper limbs, external genitalia, and prominent muscle relief now in Craiova, Cluj and Iassy, and not the écorché in the Academy of Arts, although the legend states 'Brâncuș Constantin and Gerota D. – Écorché. Nicolae Grigorescu Institute of Arts' (the name of the Academy of Arts at that time).

Brâncuș, as an artist, clearly made the écorché for artistic purposes, not as anatomical didactic material for biomedical students. The dissection he undertook shows that he wanted to contact the real 'roots' of human form, before starting to work on the écorché. A human skeleton also appears in the background of a picture of his studio dated 1902 (Brezianu, 1998).

Did Brâncuș have a classical model in mind when creating the écorché? Ionel Jianou (1963), Comarnescu & Jianu (1967), and Paleolog (1983, 2004a,b) consider that the model was Antinous. Antinous (ca. 111–130 AD) was the favourite of the Roman Emperor Hadrian; he was deified

after his death, and his beauty was memorialized in many statues. He was generally considered the classical model for the canon rules of human body proportions. Brezianu (1998) cites Ghițescu (1981): 'the model was of Hermes Capitulinus, a god representation sometimes mistaken for Antinous'. Polykleitos' Doriphoros is another possible model. The most recent hypothesis (Varia, 1995, 2003a,b), compares it to a (Susini) wax *écorché* from La Specola in Florence (see Ballestriero, 2010, this issue). Brezianu refers to the 'studies on dissected cadavers' made by Brâncuși as a student. However, Brâncuși used both sources freely, and apparently also tried first to copy Houdon's (small) *écorché*, the clay copy is now apparently in the Philadelphia Museum of Art (Ghițescu, 1981). We have found a published picture of the Museum of Anatomy in Bucharest, from 1947 (Milcu et al 1947) in which 2 *écorchés* can be seen: one painted, muscular, with upper limbs; the other white, slender, with no upper limbs. However their appearance is so different that neither resembles either of the two versions of Brâncuși's and Gerota's *écorchés* presented here.

Finally, we are left with a number of questions: why is there no *écorché* in the Faculty of Medicine in Bucharest, where Gerota taught anatomy and Brâncuși made or participated in dissections, even if it was apparently offered to the Faculty (Bercuș, 1981)? Why are there two in Craiova, very close to each other, and one in each of the other medical schools existing in Romania between 1902 and 1945? And finally, who was the more important in the production of the *écorché*? Gerota or Brâncuși or both?

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